

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Saturday, October 1st, 2016

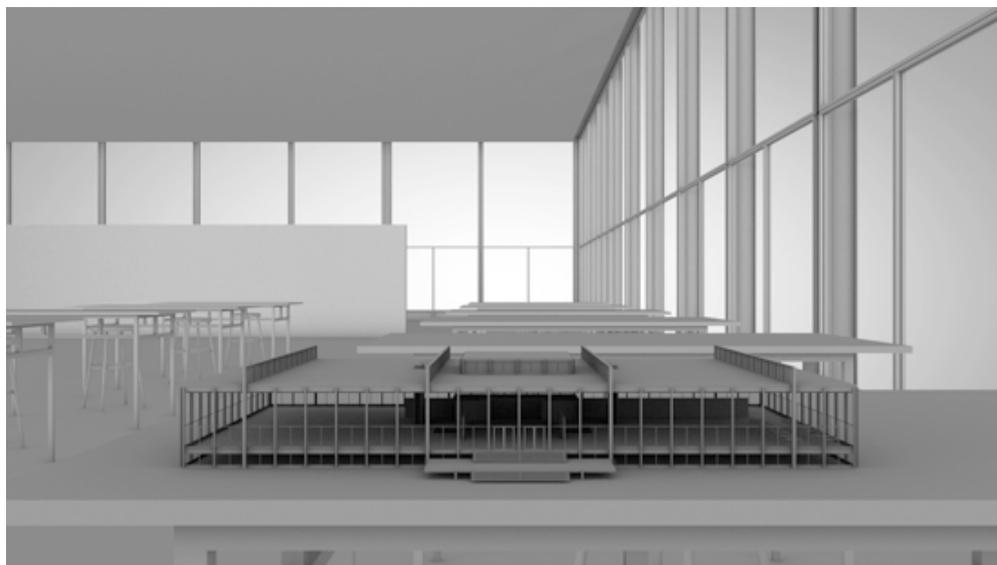
Destructive Modernism: Two exhibitions of Victor Burgin

by Hearne Pardee

***Victor Burgin: Midwest* at Cristin Tierney Gallery and *Victor Burgin: UK76* at Bridget Donahue Gallery**

Tierney: September 8 – October 22, 2016
540 West 28th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues
New York City, info@crisintierney.com

Donahue: September 8 – November 6, 2016
99 Bowery, 2nd Floor, between Hester and Grand streets
New York City, info@bridgetdonahue.nyc



Victor Burgin, *Prairie*, 2015. Still, digital projection, 8'03". edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

In his deliberately paced digital projections, Victor Burgin encourages us to meditate on the places he documents as well as on larger questions of vision and language. Involved in the early development of conceptual art, Burgin takes a methodical, analytical approach, alerting us to the way our minds make sense of experience. Seated in imposing white leather chairs, participants are encouraged to engage in the sort of “bricolage” that anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss finds at work in the creation of myths. As small text panels on black backgrounds describe unseen photographs or list names of plants, prompting us to generate our own pictures, images—sometimes animated, often inscrutable—alternate with the texts, appealing for interpretation in words. The dissolving of one panel into the next suggests movement, but these loops

CRISTIN TIERNEY

go nowhere. Instead, they encourage prolonged viewing and continued reflection on the histories they deploy.

This meditative stance contrasts with that of Burgin's early series, *UK76* (1976), which is currently on view at Bridget Donahue. It adopts the "loud" rhetoric of publicity to drive home the disparities of class in Great Britain. Commissioned by a labor group, Burgin photographed everyday scenes, using dramatic lighting and camera angles to link documentary realism to the theatricality of advertising. Text, often quoted from popular publications, is directly superimposed on the photographs, which are pasted like posters to the gallery walls. *US 77*, a follow-up project made in America, focuses on pictures used in advertisements. Drawing on writings of Guy Debord and Roland Barthes to examine the allusions and myths at work in figures like the Marlboro Man, it too is on view right now, in "Then and Now", at Philadelphia's Slought Foundation.



Installation view: Victor Burgin: *UK76* at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York

By displaying text and image separately in the new works, Burgin fosters engagement over time and more sustained probing of layered meanings. The measured intervals, like the turning of pages, create open space that sets up a context for reflection. Two recent digital projections at Cristin Tierney, *Prairie* and *Mirror Lake*, focus on the history of architectural sites near Chicago. Design, both as it penetrates the natural world and as it transforms the environments we inhabit, is a central theme, embodied in these tightly edited projections. While nonlinear in organization, they establish a historical axis by acknowledging the Native Americans forcibly displaced from both sites, and their lost languages (internalized models of the world) whose loss resonates with Burgin's emphasis on communal constructions of meaning.

Prairie is particularly stark. It establishes no sense of place, just a self-enclosed,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

monochromatic space, animated only by the occasional play of light across a blank wall or section of ornamental ironwork. Texts recount the destruction of Chicago's historic Mecca Apartment Building for the construction of Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall in the 1950s. Photographs of protest meetings are described but not shown: the computer-generated figure of an African American dancer, posing motionless on a confined stage, lends a visual presence to textual allusions to sculpture and dance. Central to the entire presentation is a set-piece digital animation, the reconstruction of a classroom with an architectural model on a table, based on Mies's glass and steel construction. This machine-like architectural space gradually unfolds, becoming a larger, identical room, in which the building we previously occupied is now the model on the table—an endless regression that ominously reflects the relentless, impersonal expansion of technology.

Burgin envisions disturbing and destructive forces at work in modernism. In *Mirror Lake*, design is embodied in images of Frank Lloyd Wright's Seth Peterson Cottage in Wisconsin, some taken by Burgin himself, but others borrowed or constructed—hybrids less solidly grounded in the "that has been" of Roland Barthes. Texts recounting the suicide of the cottage's builder enhance their uncanny quality. Digitally abstracted backgrounds of lake and sky create a sense of displacement, as the designed environment penetrates the natural landscape and suggests the work of subconscious forces. Highly edited ripples on the lake seem artificial, as though borrowed from an Alex Katz painting, and an apparently still image of a woman unexpectedly breathes: it's a clip from an Andrei Tarkovsky film and thus several steps removed from everyday life.



Installation view: Victor Burgin: *Midwest*, 2016. Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo by John Muggenborg.

Rather than focus on the specifics of place, Burgin adopts a surrealist stance and introduces other unrelated materials, challenging viewers to follow his chain of associations: an encounter on a train in New Mexico, a pan across an empty train compartment that punctuates the presentation more than once, and a spectacular

CRISTIN TIERNEY

desert landscape with a naked man leaning against a dramatically tilted rock. This last is a sensationalized media image of the American West more akin to those in his early work. The raked sand in the foreground, however, suggests that this is really no desert but an enlarged Japanese rock garden, a digital fusion of wilderness and design. The incongruity of such images – in contrast to the straightforward narration of the texts – invites speculation. The nudity of rock and figure provides a field for projection. Is this global warming? A structuralist could generate a grid of binary oppositions: women identified with life, nurture and restoration, and men with the desert, design and pilotless drones. But the point is not so much to decode as to play. The endlessness of the loop eliminates any closure, encouraging extended viewing and reinterpretation, a process akin to culture itself.

Burgin once dismissed painting as anachronistic, but his new work has much in common with painting of the academic tradition, with its literary and philosophical allusions and polished craftsmanship. His symbol-laden boulder recalls images from video artist Peter Campus's early digital collages, which combined scanned objects, texts and manipulated landscapes with overtones of melodrama and allegory. Campus has since developed a more contemplative flow in his slow-paced videos, which recall the painterly engineering of Georges Seurat. One wonders if Burgin could develop more purely visual content, perhaps extending the sequence of photos of foliage in *Mirror Lake*, for example? Is there room for the visionary visual montage that Stan Brakhage employs in his mythopoeic films? Burgin's open-ended loops offer a framework for further elaboration—perhaps even collaboration.



Installation view: Victor Burgin: *Midwest*, 2016, with still from *Prairie*. Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo by John Muggenborg.